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READING IMPROVEMENT AT THE COLLEGE LEVEL.

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THE QUESTION WHETHER OR NOT READING INSTRUCTION SHOULD BE INCLUDED IN THE COLLEGE CURRICULUM WAS EXAMINED. ALTHOUGH 75 PERCENT OF THE INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER LEARNING PROVIDE SOME TYPE OF READING INSTRUCTION, THE POSITION OF COLLEGE READING INSTRUCTION IS UNCERTAIN. THE READING COURSE HAS NO BODY OF PRINCIPLES WHICH CAN BE TAUGHT AND EXPANDED UPON. THE REQUIRED COURSE WORK IS UNDER THE AUSPICES OF MANY DEPARTMENTS--PSYCHOLOGY, ENGLISH, EDUCATION, EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY, PERSONNEL SERVICES, ETC. THE HISTORICAL RATIONALE FOR THE FAILURE OF ENGLISH TEACHERS TO ASSUME RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE COLLEGE READING PROGRAM IS DISCUSSED. IT IS SUGGESTED THAT THE ENGLISH PROFESSION CONDUCT AN EXTENSIVE STUDY OF THE NATURE OF THE READING PROCESS AND ITS HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT. THIS PAPER WAS PRESENTED AT THE NATIONAL COUNCIL OF TEACHERS OF ENGLISH CONFERENCE (HONOLULU, NOVEMBER 23-25, 1967). (JM)

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NCTE

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SESSION B-13

# READING IMPROVEMENT FOR ADULTS IN AND OUT OF COLLEGE

THURSDAY 3:00-4:30

## READING IMPROVEMENT AT THE COLLEGE LEVEL

RE 001 106

College reading as a topic for an NCTE session appears to be something new. I say this after noting that this year only one session is devoted to the topic and that last year's program indicates the same. This assumption has led me to use an exploratory approach in preparing my presentation rather attempting to treat a narrower aspect in depth.

I am quite aware that exploration suggests hasty, superficial glances, and that this is hardly suited to obtaining the serious intellectual involvement of the listener. This

handicap should be partially overcome by t/ deliberate inclusion of comments aimed at challenging many of you to an opposing point of view.

For example, one point, which I will elaborate on later, holds that we, as members of NCTE, have not given adequate thought to reading as an integral part of English teaching. It seems fitting that this point be raised with this particular audience if we can safely assume that your presence here rather than at some other session is prompted by a wish to make a closer study of reading as a facet of the field of English.

Let's begin our exploration with a look into the present status of college reading instruction. It would seem a simple matter to provide information on this point and then continue our exploration into other facets. For example, the literature supplies us with exact information on the number of colleges which today provide instruction in reading along with similar information for years gone by. Aukerman's (1) study in 1964 reported seventy-five percent of the responding state colleges and universities had reading programs. In 1951 Barbe (2) also reported approximately seventy-five percent of the colleges and universities surveyed had at least remedial help in reading as part of their curriculum. Going back further, Lee (7) reports:

> Prior to 1922, the literature failed to report a successful study in which a reading course had been included in a college curriculum.

Finally, Jungeblut and Traxler (6), in their summary and evaluation of research pertaining to college reading, support the position that college reading instruction began in the 1920's and has steadily increased in importance until the present time.

A study of the literature to this point, then, suggests a routine growth in the importance of reading instruction as part of college curricula from the time of its inception during the 1920's until now when apparently seventy-five percent of institutions of higher learning provide some type of reading instruction. From this it would seem reasonable to assume that reading instruction is well established in most colleges and that in the near future we should find it a normal, accepted offering in all schools.

Actually such an assumption is not warranted if we make a closer study of the situation. A further study of the literature suggests instead that the present status of college reading instruction is an uncertain one. Staiger (9) in 1964 states:

> The status of college-adult reading instruction is not easy to describe. Formal course work has been offered in institutions of higher learning under the auspices of many departments: psychology, English, education, educational psychology, and personnel services. In each of these, different approaches or combinations of approaches have been used so that no one college reading program can be considered universal.

He goes on to say:

> The function of reading instructors at the college level, we have seen, is not stable, but is to a certain extent dependent upon the instructor's departmental affiliation and background. In general, the reading course is not considered completely respectable.....

Heilman (4) gives additional support to the view that college reading programs,hold a tenuous position in the curriculum when he states:

> So far, the efforts to evolve programs which more closely fit the expressed philosophy that reading is a developmental process and thus justifiably belongs on the college campus and in the college curriculum have achieved minimal results.

At this point we might ask, "Is it possible to identify any other college subject that is mt the responsibility of a specific academic discipline and is identified only with it?" The answer would appear to be, "No." Is it any wonder then that college reading courses are not considered respectable in the eyes of college faculty? For a subject to be included in the curriculum of colleges and universities it must possess its own body of principles and theory which can be clearly identified so as to permit their being transmitted and expanded upon through instruction and research. The body of principles can be of a relatively broad nature and stand by itself, for example, physics. Or it might be somewhat narrower and relate to a broader area, for example,

composition, which is identified with the broader area of English. In no case could the content be of such a nature so as to allow itself to be identified with a number of different disciplines thus allowing its affiliation in a particular school to be determined by the personal choice of individuals. Such a situation - which exists in the case of reading - indicates either that the subject lacks a body of principles, and thus is not truly a college subject, or that the body of principles to be taught and expanded has not been adequately identified.

After considering this additional information provided by the literature it appears more reasonable to conclude that, indeed, a majority of the colleges do have courses in reading, but the actual content and instructional procedures exist in a state of limbo.

Other conditions relating to college reading support this position. For example a study of college catalogs indicate that very few schools give credit toward graduation for courses in reading. Also, at the present moment the NCTE, the Modern Languages Association, and the National Association of State Directors of Teacher Education and Certification are cooperating in the development of guidelines for the preparation of teachers of English for the secondary schools. These guidelines state specifically that the teacher must have background knowledge for the teaching of literature, speaking, and composition but make no such specific reference with regard to reading. Granted that this situation relates to high schools rather than colleges

it is still an indicator of the general confusion existing concerning the responsibility for reading instruction as one moves from the elementary school into the high school and college curriculums. The fact that a glance through the back issues of both the English Journal and College English uncovered almost no articles concerned with reading instruction and, as was mentioned earlier, the fact that the NCTE programs have at most a single session relating to college reading lend support to the position that reading, although an integral part of the field of English, receives little or no guidance from the academicians associated with this discipline.

There are undoubtedly many of you disagree with this last statement and with justification. You would point out that the English departments of all colleges and universities are directly concerned with teaching reading. You would agree then with Naas (8) who made the following statement last year at the NCTE convention in Houston when he spoke on "The Literature Teacher Teaches Reading":

> As the literature teacher works with his students, conducting them through the careful exegesis of a poem, helping them to discover the structure and the thesis of a short story, explicating the techniques of the author as he reveals the characters in a novel, it is important that he recognize that he is teaching reading. The cry "But the high school teacher is not

> trained to teach reading" is constantly ringing in our ears - but if he is trained to teach literature, and if he teaches it well, he is teaching reading. He cannot escape it. The separation between the teaching of literature and the teaching of reading is an artificial separation at best.

It is difficult to refute such an argument because it is essentially true. But it would be more correct to say "The literature teacher teaches the student to read literature." The ability to interpret a poem, to discover the structure and the thesis of a short story and to recognize the techniques used by an author in developing characterization and setting are only remotely related to the task confronting the student attempting to read an assignment in his history or sociology text.

The failure to clearly recognize that the skills required to adequately read and interpret literature are substantially different from those required to read with comprehension in the subject content areas of the social and physical sciences may in large part account for the reluctance of English teachers to become involved in directing additional specialized courses in reading. And this in turn might suggest why these specialized reading courses are not considered entirely respectable by college faculties.

Hopefully the remarks thus far have established that reading as a subject in the college curriculum holds

anything but a secure position. That it is being taught in various ways in the majority of colleges but less as a legitimate subject of study for which credit can be granted than as a remedial effort - to bring certain students up to standards to teach them that which they should have learned before entering college.

It would seem unquestionably that reading is an integral part of English and that, therefore, the academicians in this field should be responsible for, and give direction to, any instruction in reading occurring at the college level. The fact that today English teachers are not assuming such responsibility - and thus allowing it to go by default to other subject disciplines such as psychology and education - is due in part to the fact mentioned earlier that there is among teachers of English a sincere belief that reading skills are already being taught in connection with the well-established literature program.

A perhaps stronger reason for failure of English teachers to assume responsibility for the college reading program lies in tradition. History gives us some clue as to why instruction in reading, although a fundamental aspect of language and thus theoretically a part of the humanities, is considered of lesser significance in the liberal education of the college student. Such a situation would appear to have its historical basis in the foundation of our Western civiliation. In his book, A Brief History of Education,

Cubberley (3) indicates the Greeks, especially the Sophists, included rhetoric as an important part of their education. The emphasis was on speech and the development of orators. Grammar, however, was also stressed since the study of syntax and related skills of grammar contributed significantly to effective speaking. The Romans, although rejecting parts of Greek education, did continue emphasizing oratory and its attendant skills and, like the Greeks, stressed these studies in the grammar schools and universities. Thus rhetoric and grammar became established studies in higher education at a very early date.

Reading on the other hand has had a quite different historical development. Although instruction in reading was a function of the primary schools in both Greece and Rome, in the later secondary schools - and the universities - of both these cultures reading was dropped. There were undoubtedly practical reasons for removing reading instruction from the curriculum during these periods. Unlike today, few sources of written materials existed and consequently the lecture and oral presentations were the primary means by which university students attained new knowledge.

The rediscovery of the process of paper making by the west and the invention of the printing press changed the nature of the reading task for the college student and today he must rely on reading almost completely in his attempt to gain knowledge. The need for the college student to gain additional competency in reading is suggested by the fact,

as indicated earlier, that approximately seventy-five percent of institutions of higher learning provide some type of instruction in reading. It remains only for the English profession to become vitally concerned with giving guidance and direction to such programs and to establish such instruction as a firm part of the college curriculum.

A failure on the part of teachers of English to provide such leadership will, as we have seen, result in a variety of programs offered without official credit by any one of a number of departments with a strong possibility that the content of the offering will lack a firm academic base. In addition, during the past years a particularly undesirable situation has arisen. I refer to "speed" reading courses offered to adults and college students alike by commercial firms which frequently guarantee results. Such practices can only result in a further deterioration and loss of respect for reading courses in the eyes of both faculty and students.

Let us assume for a moment that there is substantial agreement concerning the status of college reading instruction, that its position is a tenuous one, that it exists in some form in most colleges and universities because of a vague felt need, but that the academicians and teachers in English are not, at the present moment, vitally concerned with it except as it relates to the reading and interpretation of literature.

Under these circumstances, then, if we can assume further that the profession of English should have a major responsibility for any reading instruction in its broader sense simply because reading is an integral part of the English language, then what are some possible actions which those responsible for the total field of English instruction in colleges might consider? Let me suggest just a few.

The first, and most obvious, step is for teachers of English, acting through their professional organization the NCTE, to determine what the status of college reading should be. It is conceivable, although highly unlikely, that the recommendation would be to eliminate reading altogether from the curriculum of higher education. In any case, even if this did occur at least such a decision would have been a deliberate one arrived at by the profession acting in unison and it would have been a decision arrived at by the group most competent to render it. This deliberate action is in sharp contrast to the present situation where college reading instruction exists but without explicit approval or disapproval of any given discipline.

But responsible decisions point to careful study, thus our second action must be systematic collection and analysis of information. What is presently known concerning the nature of reading? Does it contain a solid intellectual content which would then qualify it as an academic discipline to be included in the curriculum along with composition and

literature? This same information as to the nature of reading is also essential to insure effective instruction should the decision be made to include college reading in the curriculum.

Systematic collection of data must also include an historical study of reading instruction. Such a study should make us acutely aware of our present attitude. An attitude which permits us to ignore the question of including reading in the college curriculum or at times to openly oppose its inclusion while at the same time requiring all undergraduates to take composition and literature courses when it is commonly accepted that all three are but branches of the same discipline - English. Such a study would allow us to more easily recognize how tradition has influenced our present position which, on the surface at least, suggests a contradiction.

Systematic collection and analysis of information should also lead us to see at once the substantial lack of basic knowledge of the reading process and why such a condition exists. An historical study will establish clearly that reading has been, until very recent times, a concern only of teachers working with very young children. It is no criticism of this group to say that their function is to teach rather than to establish a theoretical basis for the subject taught. Therefore, reading, unlike speech, literature, and composition which have been established as disciplines in higher education for centuries and which thus have had the close attention of scholars, is a subject which has not been given

intellectual scrutiny and is sorely in need thereof. Such scrutiny will certainly establish the close relationship between reading and cognition and this in turn might require close cooperation between the fields of English and psychology in both defining the nature of reading and suggesting methods for its effective teaching.

From our brief comments on the need to gather information it should be clear that any final decision as to the future role of reading instruction in the college curriculum must be postponed until such information has been carefully analyzed. Nonetheless, it might be in order to suggest a few possibilities as to what that role might be.

Assuming that an analysis of the data did not justify a decision to discontinue reading as a part of the curriculum a reasonable position might be to allow it to become a basic part of the field of English, granting it the same status as that now held by composition and literature. Such a decision would seem desirable if it is indeed established that much scholarly effort is still needed to delineate the intellectual content of the subject. English, charged as it is with the responsibility of uncovering the nature of our language, should be able to effectively delineate the basic intellectual structure of reading. Especially if it seeks the help of the newer, behavioral sciences such as psychology.

We should remember, however, that retaining reading as an integral part of the English curriculum is not the only strong possibility open to us. We need to keep in mind that

speech, also a basic aspect of our language, has established itself as a distinct discipline with little direct connection with college English departments. Efforts to push reading in the same direction are evidenced by the establishment of separate professional organizations such as the College Reading Association, the recently formed Western College Reading Association, and the International Reading Association. The latter especially has published considerable literature on college reading. These organizations have undoubtedly made contributions but they are handicapped by the fact that their members represent a number of disciplines. This in turn has discouraged an intensive study into the nature of reading. The result has been an attempt to introduce reading as a subject in the college curriculum (the fact that seventy-five percent of the colleges have included it attest to their success) without establishing firmly the nature of its intellectual content. Undoubtedly, some of the resistance and lukewarm support has stemmed from this situation. Also, we need to remember that reading unlike speech, lacks the tradition of having been an academic discipline for centuries and would, it seems, need the strong support of both English and psychology before it could achieve respectable status in a college curriculum.

Additional ways to include reading in the college curriculum suggest themselves. For example, the decision could be made that such academic discipline accept responsibility for teaching reading skills needed for its area, much

as the English teachers instruct pupils in the effective reading and interpretation of literature. Considering that each discipline tends to require somewhat distinct reading skills makes this suggestion seem desirable. One of its major drawbacks lies in the fact that emphasis would be placed on application of reading skills with no discipline responsible for the careful establishment of the nature of the skills being taught. In light of my previous comments this would seem undesirable in that it would allow reading to have a place in the curriculum without first establishing the structure of its intellectual content.

In closing let me attempt a brief summary, I have suggested that the status of today's college reading programs indicate a need for a deeper study of the nature of the reading process and its historical development. And that this needs to be done by the English profession so that the decision to reject or retain reading as a part of the curriculum will be a matter of deliberate, intelligent choice. Also, that if a decision is made to retain reading in the curriculum, then the information gathered and its analysis should provide a sound basis for determining the form it will take.

Such a deeper study seems an especially suitable task for the English profession since such effort would result in bringing human perspective to bear on the college reading problem. Remembering always that the humanities, and English as a part of the humanities, are vitally concerned with bringing a broader view or perspective to human problems.

A final point. Note that no attempt was made to justify reading in the college curriculum because of its importance. Statements of this type are myriad and in most cases quite trite. Perhaps a thorough study of reading might include questioning its importance. Surely such effort would arrive at the deeper significance of reading by relating it back to the humanities as defined by Howard Mumford Jones (5) in his book, One Great Society. Paraphrasing liberally from passages in his book here is his view on the nature of the humanities:

> Those branches of human knowledge that have a special capacity, if properly interpreted, to mature the intellectual and moral powers and to quicken the sensibilities of the individual.

Let us hope that the academicians in the field of English are able to establish that reading is indeed one of those branches of human knowledge.

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